PAWS FOR mental health

Postvention:
A Guide for Response to Student Death at Sam Houston State University

Sam Houston State University
MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

About this Guide

Sam Houston State University intends to provide a safe and positive environment for all its stakeholders; however, when tragedy does occur, it is the responsibility of SHSU to respond in a sensitive and supportive manner.

This guide is intended for use by SHSU faculty, staff, and administrators. It is designed to address the need for pre-determined strategies to effectively and sensitively respond to campus deaths after they occur. This guide outlines specific areas of consideration and planning and offers suggestions for best practices.

Planning and implementation of postvention efforts requires a collaborative approach using the skills of campus administrators, clinical practitioners, and members of the greater campus community. Collaborative efforts include postvention planning and coordination, implementation of postvention efforts, clinical services, coordinated communication efforts, and familial support.

Table of Contents

About this Guide.....1

Introduction.....3

Postvention.....3

Definitions.....3

Goals.....3

Postvention Committee.....5

Purpose.....5

Core Team.....5

Extended Team.....5

Meeting Frequency.....6

Training.....6

Responding to and Reporting Student Deaths.....7

Coordination and Campus Notifications.....10

Coordination.....10

Campus Notifications.....10

Communications Guidelines for Family.....12

Designating a Family Liaison.....12

Communications Guidelines for Faculty and Staff.....13

Campus Vigils and Memorials.....15

Definitions

Postvention is the provision of psychological support, crisis intervention and other forms of assistance to those affected by a student death. It includes a series of planned interventions with those affected by a sudden death event with the intention to facilitate the grieving or adjustment process, stabilize the environment, reduce the risk of negative behaviors, and limit the risk of further deaths through contagion.

Definitions

- **Employee:** Full-time or part-time faculty or staff employed by SHSU.
- **Student:** An enrolled student – full or part time – who is currently attending or who would normally be attending (if the death occurs between semesters) the university at the time of death. This includes students who are taking courses for credit and/or auditing courses.
    - *Students attending SHSU through a co-operative program with another university, who are in continuing education, or similar programs are excluded from this definition*.
- **Dean of Students:** The university official designated as the holder of this title or any individual under the auspices of the Dean of Students' Office delegated with authority to effect this policy.
- **Next of Kin or Surviving Family:** The person(s) most likely to be responsible for an individual's estate in the event of death under Texas law.
    - For unmarried students, this will be the parent(s) or guardian(s) at the same place of primary residence as recorded with the university.
    - For married students, this will be the spouse.

Goals

Postvention efforts are intended to help the campus community return to a pre-crisis level of functioning and to even develop new skills for dealing with challenges in the future. Postvention efforts should effectively:

- Help those who are impacted by the death deal with current trauma and grief and help them navigate the intensity of an individual's or group's emotional, mental, physical and behavioral reactions to a crisis.
- Stabilize the campus community, restore some semblance of order and routine, and help the community find meaningful ways to integrate the loss as they move forward and find a new baseline of functioning.
- Establish protective factors to limit the risk of further deaths and imitative suicidal behaviors through contagion, as other students in the community who are struggling with psychological pain may be influenced to act in a similar way.
- Help students, faculty, and staff find solutions as this may help to enhance independent functioning.

- Facilitate understanding and help the campus community process what has happened, encourage the expression of difficult emotions, and help individuals understand the impact of the event.
- Promote meaning making of the loss in a way that restores the campus community as opposed to institutionalizing grief (i.e., when the memory of the death or suicide becomes ingrained in the institution to the point that it becomes difficult to remember the community as safe or without grief).
- Establish debriefing practices to learn from current postvention efforts to improve future prevention, postvention, and response efforts.

Postvention Committee

Purpose

The Postvention Committee is a campus-wide committee coordinated under the Dean of Students' Office (DOSO). The committee will work collaboratively to ensure that the campus:

- quickly convenes and organizes resources;
- provides prompt response;
- sets up communication channels on campus and with relevant off-campus offices and agencies;
- supports campus safety and healing; and
- provides support to the complex mental health issues for individuals and groups that may arise after a student death.

Core Team

The Core Team for the Postvention Committee will be the first to meet after a student death. This team will ensure rapid and safe communication, activation of campus resources, and coordination of postvention efforts. Membership will include:

- **Chair:** AVP for Student Affairs, Dean of Students
- Vice President of Student Affairs
- Deputy to the President
- Director, Counseling Center

Extended Team

The Extended Team* for the Postvention Committee will be called upon based on need as decided by the Core Team. Membership will include:

- AVP for Student Affairs, Health and Wellbeing
- University Police Chief
- Vice Provost of Faculty and Student Excellence
- Public Information Officer
- Medical Director, Student Health Center
- Director of Business Operations, Residence Life
- Director, CARE Network
- Director, Global Engagement Center
- Senior Associate Athletic Director
- Assistant Director of Athletics Communications
- Representative, Facilities Management
- Representative, Gordy College of Osteopathic Medicine
- Representative, Health Professions programs

- Representative, The Woodlands Center

*If a member of the Extended Team is unavailable, they may assign a representative from their department to stand in their place.

Meeting Frequency

Annual meetings

The full Postvention Committee will meet annually to discuss postvention strategies and campus updates and to explore opportunities for improvement.

Ad hoc meetings

- In the event of a student death, the Core Team will convene within 48 hours of the incident to coordinate and plan a response.
- Extended Team members may be requested to attend based on the incident (i.e., if international student, Office of Global Engagement attends).
- The Dean of Students will call a meeting to debrief the postvention efforts discussing strategies used, as well as to recommend enhanced response for similar future incidents. The initial debrief meeting will occur approximately 2 weeks after the student death and a secondary debrief meeting held 6 months after the student death.

Training

- All members of the Postvention Committee must undergo an annual training course to review the postvention guidelines.
- Annual training may be held at the same time as the Postvention Committee's annual meeting as identified above.
- If a committee member changes positions within the institution that removes them from committee membership or leaves the institution, their position must be replaced as soon as feasible. This new committee member must undergo the annual training course prior to their admission to the committee.

Responding to and Reporting Student Deaths

Sam Houston State University is dedicated to responding to a student death in a caring and supportive manner, understanding that a sudden death can impact the entire campus community, as well as family and friends of the deceased, and that individuals can respond differently to the circumstances of the death. The guidelines as outlined in this section are intended to help the Postvention Committee as well as the rest of the campus community to respond in a coordinated manner.

Guidelines

1. **Contact emergency services immediately.** Call University Police Department (UPD) emergency line at 936-294-1800 if on campus; call 9-1-1 if off campus. Follow directions provided via dispatch until law enforcement and emergency personnel arrive on scene. Be prepared to report your exact location.

   If the incident occurred in a residence hall on campus, and the first on scene is a Resident Advisor (RA), they should contact the Residence Hall Director (RHD) after calling for emergency services.

2. **Do not disturb the death scene.** *Unless providing life-saving measures*, anyone on scene should exit the area immediately, so as not to disturb the scene. Access to the scene should be avoided until law enforcement has arrived to take control of the scene.

3. **For an on-campus death,** University Police (UPD) will respond to the scene along with emergency medical services. UPD will immediately secure the scene and begin an investigation. UPD will contact the local coroner's office for transport.

   While the scene is secured, it will be considered a crime scene, and no one will be permitted into the area until law enforcement approves. If the student death occurred in a residence hall on campus, roommates and/or suitemates may need to be provided alternative housing arrangements on a temporary or permanent basis.

   For an off-campus death, UPD may be notified by a corresponding law enforcement agency.

   If any university personnel are informed of a student death, they must contact UPD as soon as possible. Law enforcement or the coroner will contact next of kin to inform them of what has happened to their student and answer any questions they may have about the cause of or circumstances around the death.

4. **Report a death to the Dean of Students' Office.** Any university personnel that learn of a student death should report immediately to the Dean of Students' Office by phone (936-294-1785), email (doso@shsu.edu) or by submitting a Student Death Notification form through the Dean of Students' Office website. The report will open a case in Maxient where the Dean of Students and other authorized representatives may make updates to the case throughout the postvention process.

   If UPD is the first to respond, the law enforcement official on-site will notify the Dean of Students.

   The Dean of Students (DOS) will oversee making the death notification to the Vice President of Student Affairs (VPSA). The Deputy to the President will make the death notification to the SHSU President and/or Provost.

5. **The Dean of Students will convene the core Postvention Committee** to coordinate communication with the campus community, as needed, provide support to students, and begin various responses to help stabilize the campus community.

6. **If a death occurs during university sponsored travel**, the university staff accompanying the travel should immediately contact local emergency services for response. As soon as possible, the staff member(s) should contact the Dean of Students Office (936-294-1785) to report.

   The on-site staff member can help manage the details abroad including arranging to receive copies of the police report and death certificate.

   In these cases, the Dean of Students and UPD should consult on how to manage family notification. In coordination with the Global Engagement Center, the university may facilitate repatriation of remains to a mortuary of the family's choosing.

   The on-site staff member may identify local support for other participants of university sponsored travel in their location. They should also consult with the Program Director to examine program safety and other factors to ensure the safety of the remaining students in the program.

7. **No university employee should make a comment or statement about the cause of death**. The medical examiner is the only official that can determine the cause and manner of death. Any speculation could create further distress within the campus community. In the event of the death of a student, all requests for information should be referred to Public Information Officer for response. Any staff directly involved with the incident should not discuss the incident with anyone who is not directly involved in response to the student death.

   To the extent that the incident implicates the Finance & Operations Policy FO-64, SHSU Policy on Clery, that policy will control.

8. **As soon as possible, no later than 48 hours, the Postvention Committee will determine the need for additional support and refer to appropriate individuals or campus resources.**

   Outreach services should address the following:

   For Students:
   - Make timely contact with friends of the deceased student;
   - Encourage expression of feelings;
   - Promote peer support among friends of the victim;
   - Encourage campus attendance at a memorial service as appropriate;
   - Avoid glamorization of the death, especially if suicide;
   - Encourage students to develop coping skills that allow resumption of routine and order.

9. **Consider how and when to discontinue services.** After a period of time, on-site counseling support (i.e., in the classroom, with student groups, etc.), if provided, may be discontinued. At the discontinuation, students should be provided with contact information to university resources per normal procedure.

Coordination and Campus Notifications

Coordination

The Dean of Students' Office will coordinate notification and crisis intervention services with the Postvention Committee and ad hoc members. Coordination of services should include:

- Assessing the situation, with particular attention to the nature of the sudden death.
- Identifying person(s) who may need support, including but not limited to, close friends, roommates, suitemates, lab partners, Athletics team members, clubs and organizations, Residence Advisors (if the student lived in a residence hall), etc.
    - When assessing potential for crisis or suicide, friends of the student who died by suicide may be at a higher risk. Special consideration and efforts should be made to these individuals to receive immediate counseling support.
    - Any students of concern who are experiencing depression, anxiety, or who have attempted suicide or had suicidal ideation may need additional support.
- Determining who will provide direct and indirect services.
    - Arrange for the Counseling Center and other designated staff to be available to drop into classrooms, residence halls, etc., on campus immediately after a student death to host group or one-on-one sessions.
    - If an office, program, or group chooses to hold gatherings or processing groups, the organizers should be asked if the presence of a counselor would be helpful.
- Informing appropriate individuals and offices about what action they should take.
- Following up to assess the impact of interventions.
- Determining whether or not future action is necessary.
- Holding a postvention review approximately 2 weeks after the death event to examine the effect of the response.

Campus Notifications

After receiving verification of the student's death, the Dean of Students' Office will notify the following offices of the student death who will follow their established processes for closing student accounts:

- Registrar
- Admissions
- Student Account Services
- Student Financial Services
- Financial Aid
- Veteran's Benefits Processing
- Residence Life
- Post Office (KatPost)
- Information Technology (IT@SAM)

- Human Resources

Additional notifications may be made to the following offices based on determinations of the Postvention Committee:

- Dean of the student's department or graduate program and college or school
- Chair of the student's department or graduate program
- Director of the unit that employed the student, if applicable
- Director – Dining Services
- Director – Athletics and/or Coach of specific Athletics team
- Director – Office of Global Engagement
- Director – Services for Students with Disabilities Director

The death notification to any department should include the following information, as applicable.

- Legal name
- SAMID number
- Classification (UG, GR)
- College
- Major or graduate program
- Date of birth
- Date of death

A student's educational records are protected by the Family and Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA). FERPA-protected educational records are strictly governed by the SHSU Academic Policy Statement 810806, Student Educational Records.

Communications Guidelines for Family

Depending on whether the student death occurred on or off campus, the appropriate law enforcement agency will make the death notification to the family. If the death occurred on campus, UPD will verify contact information for the student's immediate family and/or emergency contact. UPD will provide this information to the appropriate law enforcement agency to make the death notification to the next of kin.

After the death notification occurs, the initial contact to the family should come from the SHSU President, Dean of Students, or designee. The caller should have as much information as is available before contacting the family.

Designating a Family Liaison

The Postvention Committee may determine the need for a Family Liaison. The Family Liaison serves as the primary contact for families to provide support and streamline communications. If a Family Liaison is designated, the university official who makes initial contact with the family should be provided that person's name and on-campus phone number and email.

Role of Family Liaison

This role is intended to focus on immediate and near-term support for logistical assistance navigating university procedures. Once the needs of have been met, the Family Liaison should discontinue the relationship and long-term interaction with the family should be directed by the President.

SHSU's designated Family Liaison is the Director of the CARE Network. It is recommended for the Family Liaison to be a licensed provider in one of the following areas, LPC, LCSW, LMFT or to hold a minimum of 8 hours in mental health-related training (i.e., trauma-informed care/response, Mental Health First Aid, suicide gatekeeper training, etc.) The Family Liaison will work in conjunction with the SHSU Counseling Center's Case Manager for support in providing trauma-informed care.

If there is more than one student death, multiple Family Liaisons may be assigned to reduce the burden on a single university official.

The Family Liaison may provide the following support:

- Assist the family with necessary transportation and accommodation information, if necessary. The SHSU President may authorize university funds to assist with transportation and lodging costs if the family must travel from out of town and/or requires staying in town longer than one business day.
- Help the family navigate university protocol and procedures, including but not limited to, assistance with access to student's residence hall to remove belongings (if the student lived on campus), meeting with Registrar, Financial Aid, or other support service, and any other designated needs.
- Interpretation or translation services, if needed.

Communication Guidelines for Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff are often the first line of approach and may connect with students who are experiencing distress or crisis after a student death. It is important for these university officials to provide support to these students and be able to connect them to the appropriate campus resources.

- **Safety first**. The welfare of our campus community is the top priority. When a student displays threatening or potentially violent behavior, do not hesitate to call for help.
- **Listen non-judgmentally.** Use a non-confrontational approach and calm voice. Avoid threatening, humiliating, and intimidating responses.
- **Be proactive and direct.** If you have concerns about a student, address them early. Address the issue head on by indicating your concern for behavior changes.
- **Connect with resources.** Provide students with options for resources. Use the guidelines indicated below to help decide which is the best resource for the student.
- **Check in.** Follow up with the student throughout the semester to express ongoing care and determine if further assistance is needed.

What to do if a student is in distress/crisis

Faculty and staff may also refer to the Orange Folder found on the PAWS for Mental Health website for more detailed information: https://www.shsu.edu/orange-folder.

- **If the student is at immediate risk of harming self or others**, is incoherent or unresponsive, is in extreme distress to others or you have significant concerns about the student and cannot determine if they are immediate risk, then emergency services are vital. **Call UPD Emergency Line at (936) 294-1000 if the student is on campus; call 9-1-1 if the student is off campus.** After connecting the student to emergency resources, submit a Behavioral Intervention Form – found on the Dean of Students' webpage.
- **If the student is not at immediate risk;** however, the student is showing signs of distress, the issue is impacting multiple areas of the student's life, and you are concerned about them, provide them help in a timely fashion. **Submit a Behavioral Intervention Form through the Dean of Students' Office.** Faculty and staff may contact the SHSU Counseling Center for consultation during business hours at (936) 294-1720 or after hours by calling the UPD Non-Emergency Line at (936) 294-1800.
- **If you are not concerned for the student's safety but** believe they are struggling with academic and/or personal issues related to the student death, connect them to campus support. **Connect the student with the CARE Network.** Faculty can submit an alert through Campus Connect; staff can submit a CARE Network Referral Form, which can be found on the Dean of Students' webpage.

What to do when a student needs academic support

Below are listed some possible steps that can be taken by academic faculty or staff to support a student in the aftermath of the student death, as needed. Deans, Associate Deans, or Academic Chairs may need to be consulted for the following support:

- Do not cancel class or assignments for everyone; manage this on a case-by-case basis.
- If a service is scheduled at the same time as your class, refer to the class attendance policy. This may be considered under 2.01.L. – 'Other Compelling Absences to be Determined to be Excused by the Instructor. The instructor, at their discretion, may excuse a student's absence for other compelling reasons not defined within [the Class Attendance] policy.'
- Extending deadlines for coursework and examinations.
- Offering make-up work or examinations.
- Excluding one or more test grades from the final grade computation.
- Computing the final grade or class standing, without all work being completed.
- Providing an incomplete grade for the semester and allowing the student to submit coursework in a designated timeframe after the semester ends.

Considerations for faculty and staff wellness

As faculty and staff navigate providing support to students in the aftermath of a student death, they may also be attending to their own grief and/or secondary trauma associated with the death. University officials should put support into place for the following:

- **Check in on faculty and staff associated with the student**; this includes faculty or staff who may need to make notifications to students on campus.
- **Offer support to these university employees.** Supervisors may make the best determination on how to support their employees; however, university policies must be maintained (i.e., if a staff member needs to take a day off from work to process, they may still be required to use personal leave).
- **Partner with People Operations to coordinate support with the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).** This may include promoting services to employees, offering in-person sessions on campus, or providing access to virtual services.

Campus Vigils and Memorials

Sam Houston State University hosts its official memorial service – Raven's Call – once per academic year to honor students, current and retired faculty and staff who passed away during the previous year. As the university's official memorial service, there should be no duplications of this event by any SHSU colleges, departments, or auxiliary extensions; nor should duplications of this event occur at other SHSU campus and/or off-site locations including duplications and use of official logos or marks. **Additionally, it is not otherwise recommended for SHSU to host a memorial service for deceased individuals on an ad hoc or ongoing basis.**

- **Memorial services should be held in a timely fashion** to allow the community to process their grief and begin healing. Delaying services can extend the grieving period causing longer periods of grief, shock, or distress.
- **Memorial services should be monitored when possible.** University officials may want to be on-site to ensure that the memorial is being held in honor of the deceased individual and does not otherwise become escalated. Campus or community counseling services should be available to support mourners at and immediately after the memorial.
- **Media should not be allowed into the memorial if on campus.** Media restrictions apply as indicated in the Communications Guidelines section.
- **Memorial services should be designed to honor and mourn the deceased student as part of a normal grieving process**. There should not be discussion of the cause of death, events leading up to or immediately after the death, or any other speculations.
- **The Raven's Call memorial display is the only official university sanctioned memorial.** SHSU should not otherwise set up memorial displays on campus. If a memorial display is set up by students, the university should allow the display to remain up for no longer than 7 calendar days. At the end of the 7th day, Facilities Management will remove the display. Any items that are eligible for donation will be donated as such.
- **SHSU will not create nor will it share any accounts created to collect donations.** This is inclusive of all money sharing services including but not limited to GoFundMe, Venmo, PayPal, etc.